

Members of the committee,

My name is James Meickle, and I am a recent graduate from Central Connecticut State University here to voice my support for **S.B No. 476 AN ACT CONCERNING NONVIOLENT DRUG POSSESSION OFFENSES**. This is my second time giving public testimony. Perhaps some of you will remember me: my first time doing so was last year, before this same committee, on a similar bill.

Shortly after that experience I began working at the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy at Central Connecticut State University. During that legislative term they had held an event on drug policy to which the members of the General Assembly were invited. Due to a scheduling conflict, none attended.

Yesterday, the IMRP held an event on drug policy to which Connecticut's gubernatorial candidates were invited. *Despite* scheduling conflicts, five attended. The candidates asked honest questions and gave open answers about how they should or would approach drug policy as governor. They were not equally vocal about the topic, but for the most part, they were willing to consider that Connecticut's drug policies were doing more harm than good.

I want to emphasize how big of a deal that is, because it is a *very* big deal in American politics. For longer than I have been alive, it hasn't been okay for politicians to talk about drugs outside of the context of saying that children shouldn't be using them or that we should be locking up people who sell them. But while I consider that a sign of progress, I want to point out that we're still falling behind our neighbors. Thirteen states – including Massachusetts and New York - currently provide for some type of marijuana decriminalization. A commission sponsored by the Rhode Island Senate has determined that the state would benefit from becoming the fourteenth state to decriminalize, and there is indication that there will be legislative follow-up on that recommendation in the current term.

To the members of the committee, I have this to say: let's beat Rhode Island to the punch.

Last year, concerns were raised that we don't know enough about how safe marijuana is for individuals – and particularly, for minors. As someone who has received training in science from one of Connecticut's public institutions and who takes the pursuit of science as a serious obligation, let me tell you that it is true we do not know enough, *but only in a dry, academic sense*. The state of the science tells us that marijuana is not harmless, but it also tells us that it is still somewhat less to significantly less harmful than alcohol or tobacco. This is the case even when taking into account poorly understood phenomenon such as marijuana dependence or the marijuana-schizophrenia link.

In the interest of accurately portraying the scientific process, I will not call this a 'fact', but I will note that these findings are as close to undisputed as is possible. Let me make the policy implication of that statement clear: *exceptional* new evidence would be required to make medical, physiological, or developmental arguments against decriminalization.

Last year, concerns were also raised that we don't know enough about how marijuana decriminalization will affect society. The state of the science is even clearer, and I will provide a summary here: it probably won't. Some people will still use marijuana, and many people still won't use marijuana. That's a very consistent finding across a wide variety of countries, states, and even drugs. These studies have been done, and experts are willing – would be thrilled, even – to tell you all about them.

Last year, concerns were raised as well that decriminalization would impact the ability of police officers to conduct searches and seizures. But no one – not even people who are pro-marijuana-use – want to see our laws prevent police officers from pulling over obviously stoned drivers. That's why decriminalization policies in other states have maintained the current powers of police officers to as great a degree as possible. When legislators such as the yourselves draft those policies, that is to a great degree indeed.

I think that, fiscally, this is a 'common sense' bill. It's not something you should see and think "wow!". It's something you should see and think "huh" - as in, "huh, we're not doing that already?". But even more than that, I think that morally, this is a 'common decency' bill. It's mostly a symbolic one. Marijuana will still be illegal. It'll still be black and brown faces looking out from behind bars. But it will be a first step to admitting that the government has done something wrong.

Perhaps I won't win any friends among the members of the committee for saying so, but I think that it is your responsibility to do that. It's how the Food and Drug Administration works, and it's how we expect it to work. When they make a mistake they immediately do what they can to make Americans safer, and then they figure out why that mistake happened in the first place. If the reason is that they were misled, they go after the responsible parties. And if the reason is, to put it simply, that they screwed up? They admit to their mistake and do their best to make sure it doesn't happen again.

I realize that the FDA is more or less a faceless bureaucracy, whereas a politician has a seat to defend. Supporters of drug policy reform understand political expediency – after all, it is a large part of what got us to our current drug laws. But it has, again, been a full year since my last visit here. The American political landscape changed immensely has over that one year. The public has surprised me with its eagerness to revisit this issue, and I hope that this year the General Assembly will do the same.

Thank you,

James Meickle  
Newington, CT

The Rhode Island Senate Study Commission on Marijuana Prohibition voted 11-2 in favor of endorsing its final report recommending the decriminalization of marijuana. You can read their final report here:

**<http://tinyurl.com/y9tu981>**